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SOULS ON FIFTH

BY GRANVILLE BARKER

THE MADRAS HOUSE

ANATOL

THE MARRYING OF ANN LEETE

THE VOYSEY INHERITANCE

WASTE

SOULS ON FIFTH

In Collaboration with Laurence Housman

PRUNELLA





1916
NORMAN
WILKINSON

SOULS ON FIFTH
BY GRANVILLE BARKER
WITH FRONTISPIECE
BY NORMAN WILKINSON



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1916

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Published, April, 1916

Norwood Press

Set up and electrotyped by J. S. Cushing Co., Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.

Presswork by S. J. Parkhill & Co., Boston, Mass., U.S.A.

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SOULS ON FIFTH

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MANY times have I paced the relentless street ; on its stones that are harder than stone was ever meant to be and smoother than any false welcome in the world.

I have paced it at all hours and seasons ; when it was shadowless in a burning sun ; with the snow clouding and whitening the night. Why I started up it that early autumn morning is no matter to anyone but myself. But never had I seen the Avenue emptier, found it more silent. Day would not dawn yet for an hour. The sky was clear ; as I went it grew opaque, pressing down upon the world. There was an eddying wind, which surprised one at the street corners. Since I was alone and rather lonelier than that, my spirit sought refuge

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among impossible things. Even Fifth Avenue itself was not at that moment very real to me; a place for the body to tire in, that was all.

I had noticed somewhere about Forty-fourth Street, at a good height from the ground, a whirl in the air of what seemed—snow—ashes—dead leaves? Not snow, I thought, and too grey for snow besides. Not ashes; and what should dead leaves do there? I did not stop. By the cathedral there was something curious too. It seemed as if large grey flakes of many shapes and sizes were being blown about and caught upon the crockets of the spires. My eyes are queer tonight, I said. Up against the great door there seemed to be a shadowy drift of grey, thick and fermenting. Still I did not cross the road. I looked about though now for these strange things, and, heavens! when I looked the air of the Avenue was full of them. They were much larger than snowflakes and some were of the queerest shape. One saw them best when they blew up against the sky; though by peering carefully, I could find them

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too, grey against the grey walls, well above my head. From every corner and crevice the gusty wind was dislodging them, and it seemed as if they clung to the walls. I looked on the ground. I thought I saw several blowing past. I thought I saw one flat and still. I went up to put my foot on it. No, that was only a little facet of the pavement that had lost the reflection of the street lights. Then I turned to go back to inspect the cathedral door.

As I turned, there, quite distinctly, in the corner of a window-sill within my reach was one small grey shape. Against the red stone one couldn't miss it. I went closer. It was thicker than I'd fancied and might have been almost transparent but that it was covered, patchily, with a sort of silvery fur, not unlike the growth on an Edelweiss flower. Beneath the fur it was of a rather mottled dirty grey. There were odd markings on it which might have been made by hand. It was just about as wide at its widest as my palm and as long as a glove would be. But the shape of the shape was no shape you could name, it looked a rag. It was

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indeed very ugly, more like than anything to a dirty little bit of used grey flannel. I noticed that the thing seemed somehow to palpitate. That was queerest of all, though then I remembered the fermenting mass against St. Patrick's door. After a moment I took it gingerly in my hand. It had no weight. But by this time I was so surprised that I think I spoke aloud. "What on earth is it?" I said.

And there seemed to come from it a sound like the echo of a scraped violin, shaping into words which were:

"I am the soul of the late Mrs. Henry Brett van Goylen and I'll trouble you to put me down."

Politely and in some alarm I put her down and as I did so one of the eddying gusts of wind blew the shape of her away."

Thus then I began my search for souls. I caught no more that night for the dawn came soon. But many a night after for an hour or two before the morning broke would I adventure up the Avenue and make my bag. They

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were easy to find when you knew how to look, and after a time easy enough to catch. I thought first of buying a butterfly net for the sport but policemen would have noticed that. As it was I had to mind not to loiter long.

I was alone in New York and knew no one, though ten years before, visiting it with my father, a man of some fame, I had known every one there was to know. But now I had only work to do which took me day by day to the library at Forty-second Street. "This time then," I had said, "I will know nobody." It needed not any effort. But now, it seemed, I was to know New Yorkers as they had never been known before.

For a long time it was absorbingly interesting. There were nights on which one couldn't catch a soul. It depended a good deal on the weather, but I soon found out the quite impossible times. When the night was still, they hung — a cubic layer of them, four miles long and more and very thick — a hundred feet or so high in the air. It was some while before I could discover the general laws of their being,

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but I gathered for one thing that, normally, a sort of double river of souls was always flowing up and down Fifth Avenue; not side by side as the traffic flows, but above and below; below, of course, to come up and above to go down. This was the general law; and, in spite of interruptions and scatterings, the flow never ceased. They are supposed to be quite invisible and in nothing like daylight have I ever caught a glimpse of one. Heavy rain is hard on them. It beats them to the ground in a sort of jellified mass. I went out one pouring night to discover what did happen then. For a long time I could see nothing, the wet had made them transparent to my eyes. But soon I found that I was actually treading inches deep in a mess of souls. While such a thing can give them no actual pain yet the indignity of it was great and I felt I could not stop and talk to any of them that night. Besides they were all mashed up one with the other, like jujubes that a child has warmed in its pocket. I should have had to pick them apart.

A blizzard upsets them badly. X I remember

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a soul telling me that once for a long time she was blown and blown between Forty-second and Forty-fifth Streets, never further either way. She'd get into the stream flowing down, but every time at Forty-second Street, a gust would whirl her up and round, and at Forty-fifth the same thing happened if she'd got into the stream flowing up. She said it went on like that for a year. She probably didn't mean to be inaccurate, (these disembodied beings quickly lose our sense of time) but I've no doubt she was blown about so for some days. It is the light eddying wind which brings them down to earth or near it and scatters them into corners singly or by twos and threes. That was the great weather for soul-hunting and I did my best never to miss a night of it.

From first to last I suppose I had talks with quite five hundred souls. But they were difficult to get on with; that's the truth. I had thought at first that any of them would be thankful for a terrestrial chat. Not a bit of it. In the first place they took no interest whatever in the affairs of the world. They knew

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of nothing that had happened in it since their deaths and, as a rule, they cared to know nothing. I believe that not more than a dozen times was I questioned. A woman might ask me if I knew her widower, but it was purely to make conversation, the habit of small talk not having died with her. Three men at various times wanted to hear about the last Presidential Election. But two of them I found did not in the least know how long they had been dead; it was Bryan's chances against McKinley they were fussed about. No doubt they had been keen politicians for when they learned that eighteen years had passed since then in which many most serious things had happened to the world, they at once lost all interest.

Usually they would only talk about themselves. They wouldn't even recognize the existence of other souls. They were not more egotistic than they had been in the material world, but now there was no false shame about it, and it was carried to extremes for which even forty years' growing contempt for the human race found me unprepared.

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X I remember for instance how the lady who was blown wildly for what seemed to her (poor dear!) a year between Forty-fifth and Forty-second Streets, would keep on insisting that such a thing had never happened to any soul before. I sympathized with her for the uncomfortable time she had had; but no, that wasn't enough. She kept at it till I bettered her by saying that, quite obviously, such a thing never could happen to any soul again. Then she was satisfied.

There were exceptions. There was the Reverend Evan Thomas. It was from him indeed that I gathered most information; by his help that I was able to grasp at last what really was happening to them all in this future life.

I found the soul of this once popular preacher on a September night wedged in the shutters of a candy shop. I dug him out and he thanked me. He was about seven inches long by three broad, quite straight down one side, but with undular indentations upon the other; of no thickness to speak of, with rather a rub-

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bery surface and in colour a sort of blueish grey. It was a fine night. The harsh gust of wind that had wedged him in the shutter had died down and we had a long and pleasant chat.

He spoke with equal ease and cheerfulness about his past life and his present death. Was this state of things the Heaven he had spent so much time and energy preaching about? No, on the whole he didn't think it was. But in that case had his soul (I had to put this delicately) and the thousands upon thousands of other souls besides that we knew were drifting up and down — had they taken, so to speak, the wrong turning? No, he didn't exactly think that either. I must remember, of course, that he had not been dead long. I must also remember that for many years now the world, or, at any rate, that part of it that lived and moved on Fifth Avenue, had taken Heaven so much for granted that it had become the vaguest of ideas to them and had entirely ceased to believe in Hell. Now people cannot possibly go to places they don't understand or believe in; that stands to reason. And he quoted me a line from the

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Acts about the man who died and went to his own place. That had furnished him, he thought, with a solution of this question.

“When I first died,” he told me, “and found myself floating lightly about here, I will own that I was puzzled and even — though I had and still have every faith in God’s goodness — even a little disappointed. It was true that in the exercise of my calling I had refrained from painting any very definite picture of the state of bliss to which the souls of the righteous should be called. My own congregation was certainly not such a one as I could indulge in any highly coloured or romantic vision of that Future. They were well educated, practical people. Besides, as far as I could see, the use that they did already make of their imagination was very questionable. To say that they used it merely as a stimulus to erotic frivolities would perhaps have been too harsh, though I have at times been tempted to put my complaint in so many words. But what they needed from me surely, was sobering, commonplace morality. Still, let me confess that when it

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actually came to entering upon a more blessed existence, I had in my secret heart looked forward to something in the nature of a pleasant little surprise. And to find myself drifting —”

“Still drifting,” I said, rather wickedly.

He was not to be checked by any mere witticism — “Drifting,” he went on, “and for all I know drifting for an eternity up and down Fifth Avenue! — it was disappointing.

“But I reflected. As a rational Christian I was eager to assure myself of God’s laws and then to square them, if possible, with the exigencies of any world in which it might please Him to place me. And I have always been ready, nay, anxious to search out my own faults and if necessary to repent of them. So in the course of much drifting and some whirling, often round the very steeple that pointed to heaven from above the pulpit of my late labours, I disinterestedly reviewed my former existence and gathered it up, so to say, as even the longest life may be gathered, into a dozen sentences. See, now, if they do not give you the key to this mystery.

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“I remembered my call from a sphere of popular eloquence in England to the church that — well, it can hardly be said to ornament Fifth Avenue, but it is a pleasant comfortable church. I knew nothing of America at that time. But I had heard stories of the luxury of New York women and of financial corruption among the men, and when the flattering offer came I naturally asked myself whether God had not summoned me to scarify, though lovingly, these highly placed sinners, to bring them to repentance and a more humble following in the footsteps of their Lord. I settled, if possible, to turn a surplus of the enormous stipend they were to give me into a trust fund for some sensible and suitable charity —”

I looked. We were opposite the very church.

“Is the stipend so big?” I asked and nodded across.

“When it came to the point,” he said, “I found it not big enough. I had a grown-up son and daughters. They had, of course, to mix on terms of equality with my congregation. We had to keep up appearances; the

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lay patrons of the church expected it. Still we were never seriously in debt.

“To continue —”

“Please,” I begged him. I was enjoying it. He had evidently been a preacher of some style.

“My congregation at once impressed me as being made up of charming people, kindly, clever and hospitable, boundlessly hospitable. We spent several weeks, my wife and I, or my eldest daughter and I, night after night, dining with the chief families among them. One should always accept such invitations, one should view the home-life of one’s flock. And while I was sampling them, sizing them up, determining by personal and unprejudiced observation upon which most prevalent vice or failing the sword of my spiritual condemnation should first fall, I merely preached week by week, not to be rash, not to be unfair, sermons upon less disputable subjects, sermons that purposely avoided any vital thrusts into that body politic to which I was now the chosen minister.

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X “They were admirable to preach to; quick to seize on a point, ever ready for those little sub-humorous sallies which are the salt of a sermon, the delight of a preacher who can discreetly indulge in them. One could not hold their attention long, it is true, but it was keen while it lasted. They liked to have their intelligence appealed to, they welcomed my references to the very latest things in science and literature. I projected a series of sermons, in which I proposed to take Sunday by Sunday the works of some famous sceptical philosopher and endeavour to reconcile them with the Christian Ethic. Such a course would not have been possible in England, where, I will confess, the indifference of congregations to my very extensive modern reading and the quotations I could make from it had often nettled me exceedingly. But these New Yorkers, I did find, to use a vulgar phrase, to be both mentally and spiritually a thoroughly up-to-date crowd.

“Not, mind you, that I had weakened in my resolve to scarify them, when need were

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and opportunity came, for their deeper sins. But I had found that they were not children, they were not fools, that the thing needed doing well, and from the point of view of a thorough understanding of the very peculiar circumstances under which fashionable life must be lived here, otherwise it had better be left alone altogether. That thorough understanding I set myself conscientiously to acquire.

"But, dear me!" he broke off. "My twelve sentences have been much exceeded. Old habits! And about myself—it is inexcusable." Again I begged him to continue. Quite cheerfully he did.

"I found many difficulties in my way. Society women undoubtedly did indulge in outrageous luxury, but the worst offenders did not come to my church, and to berate them in their absence would merely have given undeserved satisfaction to the women who did come and were themselves by no means innocent in the matter. That is a danger in preaching. Your congregation will always imagine that you are—as one says—getting at their neigh-

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hours and not at them. I did make a most strenuous effort, though, to tackle the question of financial corruption. I worked at it for weeks. But it was a very difficult subject, involving a great complication of figures (at which indeed I was never good) as well as several tricky points of difference between State and Federal law which it really needed an expert to solve. But I could not, above all things, risk exposing my ignorance. That would have done more harm than good. The habit that newspapers in this country have of reporting sermons flatters, it is true, but also intimidates. In the end, to my lasting regret, I felt compelled to abandon the idea.

"I remember I made one attempt to deal with the simple sin of over-eating, of which quite 70 per cent. of my congregation were without doubt guilty. I hung the constructive part of the sermon upon the subject of Food Reform, a very popular one just then. But the destructive part had to be too delicately done to make a real effect. It had to be. For had I not myself fed and fed well at

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most of their tables? And in the flesh I was a little inclined to stoutness.

“And so after a while I found that I slipped into preaching to my congregation only such sermons as my congregation wanted to hear. What else was to be done? They would not otherwise have come to hear me at all, for there is no law to make them, and nowadays precious little public opinion. I should have lost any chance at all of doing good. \ As it was, by contriving at any cost to be interesting, my church was kept full, and, starting ostensibly from strange and far-away subjects, Wars with the heathen, Greek Legends, or the latest good novel, I never failed I think in the end to bring my hearers, though at the time they might hardly be conscious of it, one small step nearer to Jesus. It is true that a really strong man in my place might have done better before they turned him out. \ All I can say is that I did the best that was in me. But looking back I see quite clearly now what happened. I had set out to convert Fifth Avenue; it was Fifth Avenue converted me.

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"And that, my dear sir, is why, though disembodied, I am still here and why we are all here; poor souls. In our lifetime, this, at its best, was all we strove towards, and in our death we have come 'to our own place.'"

He ceased. His shape had all the time been lying comfortably along my left forearm. I looked up from it to where, in the air above me, the river of souls flowed ceaselessly on. (It was a still night now.) I could never make out why, since they had absolutely no personal power of volition, some always got along faster than others. On an average they seemed to make about three miles an hour. It was a wonderfully weary sight.

"Who are they, generally speaking?"

"Well," said the preacher's soul, "it's a most curious mixture. There are the tip-top people who used to belong here and never thought there was any further to get. And then there are all the people who badly wanted to get here in their lifetimes and never could."

"I take it that the two sorts don't mix well," I said.

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"There again," he went on, "it doesn't work out as you'd expect. We're all here now because we belong here and we know it. There's no escape; and, as we can't control our movements, we've no power now of associating with one lot of souls more than with another. The wind bloweth us where it listeth. So the consequence is that we don't worry much about our behaviour: and the people who are rude by nature are just rude to everybody, and the snobs are snobbish and the cads caddish and the bullies bully and the gentle folk are gentle without any respect of persons. Nothing else is expected of us. It makes a simple world of it."

"Is there no escape, do you say?" I asked him.

"I don't see how there can be," he said rather plaintively. "In the last world you could — what is called — 'make something' of yourself. You could choose your profession and your friends, you could do right or wrong. You could deny your Lord or act up to your faith."

"Could you always?" I argued. "Circum-

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stances handicap one shockingly. We mean to do better than we ever can."

"My friend," said he, "your faith is the thing you do act up to. That's what we have discovered here. God makes no excuses. The pious opinions you hold have no more effect on the soul than a knowledge of the multiplication table."

"But don't you desire to escape now? How about the effect of that?" I pressed him.

For a little he did not answer; I waited patiently. I have forgotten to remark how soon I had found that for talking to a soul the human voice is a clumsy and unnecessary instrument. One could imagine (I did at first) that the shapes emitted queer little sounds, but I cannot see how that actually could be. I believe that one only instinctively clothed the impressions they conveyed direct to one's mind in the tones of a human voice. And with a very little practice one did not need to do that at all. One could communicate with extraordinary swiftness and ease by imagination alone, talk soul to soul, as it were. It is a simple trick,

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can be practised between human beings while on earth and is indeed the best form of conversation.

After the moment of silence the soul of the reverend gentleman sighed.

“No,” he said, “I cannot honestly say that I want to escape for I cannot muster up a belief that there is anything much else to escape to. All the effort I was capable of in that direction I made in my former life. And I am useful here. I really think I am. Our Lord, you will remember, ministered to the spirits in prison. Whenever I am blown against another soul, whenever the wind gathers two or three of us together, I take up the tale of salvation as I used to do on earth. Those, if I chance to hit upon them, who were accustomed to hear me in that church opposite, are a little bored by it perhaps, for naturally I have nothing new to say. But to the others, to those who had to content themselves on their earthly pilgrimage with nothing but the ideal of Fifth Avenue, and with more commonplace spiritual ministrations — to them, I do think that the

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Word of Truth as I am inspired to speak it is a comfort. | Though of course it cannot now get them on any further, yet if it consoles them in their present station — well, that is one of the main functions of religion, is it not?"

"But to endure this sort of thing through an eternity!" I said.

"My dear young man," he patronized me, "Time is an illusion. I remember so well making this point in one of my most characteristic discourses. Time is what we think it, a minute of agony is an age, a year of happiness is a minute. Doesn't it strike you that an Eternity of boredom may perhaps have no extreme meaning to those who, after all, have spent most of their time in being bored? You cannot measure emptiness. And Eternity is only the emptiness of Time.

"Hadn't you better let me fly now," he added, "and go home? It will be daylight soon and from what you tell me you haven't been to bed for nights."

I took his soul between my finger and thumb.

"I am exceedingly grateful to you," I said.

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“You have thrown light on what was puzzling me much. Do you think we shall meet again?”

“Only by pure chance,” he answered. “Unless — I have a fancy, which I have not yet been able to prove, that if there is a true affinity between souls they will come together in God’s good time. I had an acquaintance on earth, an interesting fellow, who built up quite an elaborate theory of soul-affinities. But he ended by walking off with a married woman, which was, to say the least, a most immoral anticipation of God’s purposes. Since I entered this state, I must own that I have not yet — and it is strange — blown up against my dear wife, who predeceased me by some few years; also that I have only met two of my very intimate friends. My wife was, I am sure, near as well as dear to me on earth, but then Fifth Avenue may not have been very dear to her. Possibly her soul is somewhere at home in England. On the other hand, time and time again I find myself mixed up with souls here that are not at all the sort I should have chosen to associate with before. That puzzles

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me. I shall be interested to see if we two do run across each other much. Good night."

I flung him gently into the air. He sailed quickly out of my sight, for the flowing river was dim now almost to extinction. I doubted somehow if we should meet again.

This had been illuminating. I saw at once where by sheer tactlessness I had failed in talking to the souls. I had assumed that they were unhappy. Not a bit of it. They had got what they wanted. Getting that one always speaks of as a state of heaven upon earth. If then, the final and eternal Heaven turns out merely to be a little more of what we want, what sensible man should turn his back on it for that?

Nor could the souls run, of course, to great variety of disposition. Roughly, as the parson said, one could divide them into two classes, the aboriginal population and the invaders. The invaders should have been the more interesting to talk to for they had achieved here what they could only long for in life, and, one might think, were therefore actively enjoying themselves.

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But their complaint was that being in an enormous majority they were mostly only blowing up against each other all the time so that they hardly got into touch with the true Fifth Avenue at all. | It was of course a great satisfaction to them to find they were really there at last, but they could tell me nothing much about it. And about the places they had lived in on earth they simply would not speak of them at all. Still much could be guessed at by that.

The old inhabitants, the aborigines, were, one gathered, mostly women and butlers; and the butlers who had been sent away to die, were always glad to be back in their element. I looked almost in vain for souls of the mighty men who had built the great houses and lent them their fame. I believe they are mostly to be found down at Wall Street where they and the bankrupts and gamblers must make a busy crowd. I was indeed assured of this by a very ladylike soul. Business, she said, had been the one thing lovely and pleasant to her husband in his life, and in his death she most sincerely

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trusted he was not divided from it. Here was, by the way, a case of that affinity that had so interested my preacher friend. This lady-like one had been a most successful hostess in New York, a model of charming manners, a great authority on good form; and now she was always being blown around with the soul of her butler. It caused quite a scandal.

I rather wondered that so many of these clever, charming women should be left drifting about. I think that, to begin with, they had wondered at it too. For they had travelled all over the world; there was nobody they did not meet, nothing they could not do (given the talent and understanding which one supposes, of course, they had). They were not used either to live in their big houses for more than a few months in the year. But perhaps, despite the wonders of the world they saw, and the glories of men's labour they glanced at and passed by, it was always the love of Fifth Avenue which was at the core of their hearts; so here they still are. 33

(I did meet one most indignant party. He

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took me (goodness knows why!) for a parson and attacked me straight away.

"Call this a future life!" he said. "It's disgraceful. You clergy ought to be ashamed of yourselves! No, never mind what denomination you belong to. You were all in a gang together. It was a regular religious Trust and you know it. Well, I put myself in your hands. Sunday after Sunday I sat under the most sensible one of you that I could find. I did what he said about giving money in charity and keeping well out of temptation. I believed all he told me; I squared the Bible with the higher criticism right along. I lived a decent life and I died without a murmur when my time came. And now I'm not a bit better off than I was before. What are you going to do about it?"

"But you must like it," I urged, for I was sure of my ground by this. "You couldn't be here at all unless you did like it, you know."

"It isn't a question of what I like," he persisted. "I didn't do things on earth because I liked doing them, but because they were the

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proper things to do. And when I made a firm contract I kept it. You chaps made a contract with me about a future state of bliss and I expect you to deliver the goods."

It was useless arguing with him. He had all sorts of minor grievances. He wanted the place kept more select. Not that he disliked all these other people, but he just thought they hadn't any right to be there. He wanted to know if his soul couldn't somehow be attached to his old house standing somewhere about Seventieth Street, which his widow and daughters still lived in. It would mark out a position for him, give him more dignity, he said. He even thought that his old room might be set apart for him and wouldn't I call on his widow and arrange it? But it was the general state of haphazardness that he most objected to.

"It's such a muddle," he grumbled. "I thought of forming a small well-chosen committee to deal with the problem. But there's no means of getting one together. And when I am blown up against anyone that might suit

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I find them absolutely selfish. Why that wonderful public spirit which used to animate us has not survived I cannot think."

"No," I said, "it is strange!"

He wanted me to form a committee on earth, was ready to subscribe, in reason, to its expenses if any means could be found of his doing so. He was sure that if the prominent citizens of New York could be brought to understand that Heaven was so near to them and was kept in such a condition they would see to its improvement at once, would remodel it, in fact, from end to end. He spoke of a travelling commission to visit similar future states in London, Paris, Berlin and Buda-Pesth.

"We could adopt the best feature of each," he said, "and I am sure that in addition our well-known efficiency and powers of organization would not fail us."

He was quite convinced that there was nothing either in the world or out of it which money and energy could not accomplish. I think he had been some sort of a business man.

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Then there was the soul of the painter that I found the wind beating frantically against the Metropolitan Museum. I asked him what in heaven's name he was doing there. He had been the forger, it turned out, of one of the most famous Old Masters in the collection. It was the best thing he had ever done. If he could have owned to it, it would have made his fortune.

I said I thought not, that what we wanted nowadays were new masters not old. But he would not listen to me; he was an academic soul. He had brooded on the wrong done him, on this theft of his genius that this snobbish flattery by the present of the past had committed, until his heart broke. He was sure, he said, that in a little while a kind wind would blow him into the Museum itself and up against his masterpiece and that then he would melt into it forever.

I have not said how strange the souls were to look at. Though their shapes did not answer at all to human shapes, yet by many curious variations they seemed to indicate character.

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I saw one once nearly five foot long and only a few inches broad, with curious markings all down. He was spiteful when I spoke to him. I don't know what he had been. Mostly, though, they were irregular ovals and oblongs about eight inches by three. There were rhomboids too and I saw several squares. At least, they looked quite square till you came to measure them up. There were some very tiny souls, some not larger than a dime; and there were some just scraps of rag, torn almost to bits; you wondered how they held together.

But it was the markings on them that were most curious. It was by these, even when they'd speak least about themselves, that I could often tell what they once had been. For as the thing you are in this world stamps itself in time upon your face, so will the things you do stamp themselves forever on your soul. Nearly all of them, for instance, had touches of rather tarnished guilt. One large and wobbly soul you might almost have mistaken for a torn bit of Russian embroidery, and one was covered with fine flowing lines

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like a Helleu etching. Some were warty; I never could bring myself to touch them. Many had holes in them and some were thick like little mattresses and plain dark grey. And when I had begun to learn the language of the signs, I found there were things marked upon some souls of which I cannot speak. They did not know that the evil thing was plain. They would talk to me as pleasantly and carelessly as you please. But while I listened to what they said I looked at what they were. There were the jagged lines that told of secret cruelties, stained blood-red into the souls of the torturers, whose homes had been but dungeons of despair for weaker souls than they. There were the white disease spots of the coward; mildew spots that rot away, in time, the very substance of the soul. There were the blisters of slanderous thoughts, which thicken and coarsen till the soul, a horny mass, is not sensitive to truth and love and beauty any more. No, there is no hell for such spirits. Is there any need for one?

Some souls, I saw, too, scored with the

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marks of undeserved old suffering and loss. These would sometimes look like well-healed wounds, but with the women often they were only painted and powdered down and I could see that still they festered a little and were diseased.

It was in the very depth of winter that I first found the Little Soul. The snow was thick and crisp, the night dark, and the air still. Mostly the rest must have been buried deep; for nothing beats them down like snow, and they have to wait for its thawing. But she had been lucky and she hung to the branch of a tree that bordered the park, for all the world like a queer little grey icicle. I broke her off, carefully, for she was frozen very stiff. She would not say much to me that time. She told me afterwards that she had been shy. But I was quite used to that sort of thing though indeed I had done her a kindness in taking her from the branch and, when she had thawed a little on my hand, letting her float up into the calm air. I remember noticing chiefly that she was very small (she did not overlap my palm as she lay on it), of a pretty oval shape,

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and light grey in colour; she had a slight silver down on her, shaded here and there.

Not more than two days later I found her again, at the extreme end of my beat this time, beyond the Reservoir. We talked for a while. She did not want to talk of herself, but asked much about me. This was the first time such a thing had happened with any soul. I told her that the end of my work was in sight and how I counted on leaving New York in a very few weeks for ever. Didn't I like it, she asked. I told her that I hated it, that I did not know whether I hated it more when I mixed in daytime with the people who thought they were alive or at nighttime with the people who knew they were dead. She said I was unfair, that it was a great city and she was sure there were still very charming people in it.

"That's it; it's not my business to be fair," I said. "New York is too big and I'm too small. But I can love it or hate it if I like."

She asked why I really hated it. I told her. It was a sufficiently good reason.

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She answered more readily now when I questioned her about herself. She had died young, at thirty-five or so; a bungled operation which the surgeons could not own to. She had been married to a quite well-known man, whose name I had seen, curiously enough, only a day before in the papers set to an announcement that he was marrying again. I was not sure whether to tell her this; then I did. She said she was very glad and asked the name of the woman. I couldn't remember.

"Not that it matters," she said. "If she's a reasonable sort of woman they should be quite sufficiently happy."

"That is about the height of one's ambition," I said, "in making a second marriage."

After a pause she added, "I was quite happy at least; I should have been foolish not to be."

"Did you leave any children?" I asked her. "Stepmothers are much whiter than they are painted, you know."

"No," she said. "I had three in the first five years of my marriage. But one died after two months and two were born dead."

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Then the doctor said I wasn't strong enough and forbade me to have any more. He couldn't make out why I wasn't, he had tried all the tonics he could think of. But I knew."

I waited for her to go on.

"It wasn't that I didn't love my husband or that he didn't love me. I think he did and he was always very kind. Though, indeed, people say that need not stop your having children; but I should think it would, shouldn't you?"

"Nature is not quite so nice," I answered.

She paused again. Then, unexpectedly — "When were you in the country last?" she asked.

I told her that a few weeks before I had gone for a walk on Long Island, how grey it had all looked and dead.

"But in a week or two," she said, "the woods will be wonderful. The green of the trees will almost pain you with joy, it'll be so sharp and bright. And there'll be dogwood that promises a happy year.

"I was born when the dogwood was in blossom," she said. "When I was little it was

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my birthday flower. On that morning mother always had them make an arbour of it for me. And after breakfast I'd be put there to sit in state and my presents would be brought to me. And when I died I know they put dogwood about my body and in my grave; that was in the springtime too. They thought it a pretty thing to do, but what did it matter then? Why, what had it ever mattered? What had that life and the beauty of it ever been to me from the beginning? Something I was taught to play with."

By now the barriers of my earthly state were down and she spoke on quite simply to my soul.

"But for all that I don't belong here, you know," she said, "drifting about above Fifth Avenue, and it's very dreadful. I never did belong here when I was alive, however happy I managed to be."

"Where did you belong?" I asked.

"In the wild places," she answered.

"Then why didn't you go to them?" I spoke crossly. I have no patience with people who talk helplessly.

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"Well, you see," she said, "my father was well off, and I was sent to school and brought out into society and married to the right sort of man. It was all done for my happiness. But always when my front door closed on me it was like the door of a cage closing. I was out of doors whenever I could be. I had a garden —"

"You had vegetables for dinner, I don't doubt," I interrupted.

"What would you have done then, had you been me?" she asked.

"Done what I wanted to," I told her.

"But when you can't want!" she said.

"Ah," said I, "there's no remedy for that."

"You see," she went on, "I was taught life like a lesson. I learnt it and I was repeating it, and then death came, and now it seems that I never even started to live. But is that why I'm never going to die? Because that's so dreadful."

This was new to me. "What more of that do you want to do?" I asked her.

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She cried out. "Oh, don't you understand? In Nature everything is so glad and proud to die — really and truly to die. To flower and fruit, to serve its turn, give what it is and has, then perish and be forgotten, not to cumber the memory of the earth at all. That's the true happiness, the only glory, to spend oneself utterly and die.

"I always hated having a soul," she said, "it made one so careful and egotistical. My flowers had no souls and while they lasted they were always fresher and finer than ever I was. My dog didn't have a soul to start with. He was a dear beast, quite undignified and foolish. Then, being so much in the house with us and what with the maids petting him, he began to grow a sort of imitation soul and became self-conscious and appealing. I sent him to the stables, I was so cross, and told them to train him after rats."

She laughed.

"You mean," I said, "that you never have wanted an immortal soul. Yes. I understand that."

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"What's the use of one?" she cried. "What's the use of all these silly shapes flapping around here? What good are they to themselves or anything else?"

"But what should happen to them?" I asked. "God never destroys anything utterly, you know. It's against the rules."

"I know what does happen," she said slowly, "to all the true lovers and workers who have given their strength without stint or question, without bargain or hope of reward, to the service that they saw. Their work is their immortality and the salvation of those they worked for and loved. For themselves they have earned oblivion. And if, their bodies dead, the fire of faith by which they burned like beacons in the dark does not at once die too, it falls in little flames of inspiration upon the hearts of all the comrades that could understand."

"That's a fine enough belief," I said, "and you put it so finely that I really can't make out what you are doing here at all."

"Nor can I," she replied, "and it's very dreadful, isn't it?"

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"Ah but I can," I added, and I told her coldly and hardly, as it had been truly told to me — "It is the things you do that count, not all the pretty beliefs and hopes, with which you decorate your heart and mind. The inexorable laws that God has made take no account of what you'd like to be and wish you were. How can they? What are you that you should complicate the scheme of things with Ifs and Ans? There's your life. Live it as you choose, and take the consequences."

She was dreadfully silent.

"But I didn't choose," she said. "And it's all very well for you! You haven't got to drift up and down this horrible Avenue for ever and ever and no amen. If I'd only known I'd have been wicked, so I would."

"Why wicked?" I was impatient.

"Yes, that's the silly thing," she said. "When you're so well brought up and well looked after you can't be yourself at all without being wicked."

I wondered how wicked she would have managed to be. And she caught me wondering

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before I was aware. We were slipping into sympathy, it seemed.

"Well," she exclaimed, "I was very pretty, I tell you I was."

I laughed. It's a paradox I always laugh at rather grimly. How can wickedness and the beauty of women go together? Oh, blindness of the morality of man! Then she went on to speak of other things.

When I wished her good-night she said:—
"You'll go back to those woods when it's springtime and the sun is shining through them, won't you? Go there in the early morning and sit silent and when the little live things around you begin to talk, think of me."

"I will," I said.

"For that was how my soul was meant to live and die, I'm sure," she said. "And it has never been itself since the Dogwood days."

For a week or more after this I did not see her. To say truth I did not altogether want to. I walked up the Avenue once or twice but I took care to keep her out of my mind and so, as I had begun to learn, kept her away

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from me. For she had impressed me rather. Not favourably; for all her fine thoughts her chatter about wickedness showed her to have been a frivolous little fool. But after the struggles and temptations of some years I had succeeded in detaching myself from all interest whatsoever in my fellow creatures and I did not choose to be impressed, even unfavourably, by anybody. The third time I went out, though, I was making such conscious efforts not to think of her that I only produced the very opposite effect and there she hung in the air a foot before my nose.

She was genuinely glad to find me.

"I began to fear we weren't in sympathy at all," she said, "as you didn't turn up again. By the way, are you a man?"

"Yes, of course," I told her. Somehow I had assumed she knew.

"I couldn't be quite sure, you see," she said, "only talking to you soul to soul. For once we lose our bodies there are so many gradations from malest-man to femalest-woman that you can't always draw a definite line; and

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sex in the old earthly sense doesn't seem to count. It's rather a blessing."

"Well, I am a man," I told her decidedly.

"I did put you down as one," she went on, "because you were so priggish the other night when I spoke of committing sin."

I denied being priggish.

"Oh, but you were feeling priggish," she insisted, "no matter what you said."

I told her she had no right to pry into my feelings.

"Nonsense," she cried, "you've the advantage of your body, you can run away when you like, leave me all the good I get from being a naked soul. I need never listen to lies again, not even little ones."

"Well, I do think that your notion of committing sin by running off with some man or other, or, worse, by not running off with him, was excessively trivial and vulgar. Besides, it wouldn't have kept you from being here. On the contrary."

I know that she smiled a little sadly.

"There it is," she said.

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"We don't want to go tumbling out of one man's arms into another's. Maybe you only encourage us to do it by calling it Sin. For what we do want is somehow to escape the terrible consequences of being good."

Then she moaned a little, sorry for herself.

"And I must, I must escape from this awful immortality," she said. "Isn't there any way it can be done?"

"Perhaps," I suggested, "if you could fix firmly in you a desire for something different it might be granted."

"No, we can achieve no new desires here," she said. "Isn't it dreadful?" That was a constant phrase of hers.

"Can't you call up the memory of an old one?" I asked. "There must have been something other than Fifth Avenue in your inner life."

"Now I'll tell you," she said. "I've tried that. I used to plan that when my husband got free of business, if he ever did, we'd take an old castle in Italy or on the Rhine and live there at least six months in the year. I fixed that

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idea well in him. He'll want to do it with his other wife now and I daresay she won't like it a bit. I wish you hadn't forgotten her name. Well, I thought to myself when I'd been dead a while : Half an eternity in any place in Europe is better than spending the whole of it here. So I set my desire hard on some old castle, just as I used to in life to make my husband promise he'd buy one. And one night I thought I'd got to it and I was so glad. There were the battlements and the rocks and the moonlit lake below. But it turned out only to be that sham place that's really the water-works in Central Park. So after that I gave up trying."

We stayed some time in silence. She had nothing else to say. I had no more suggestions. But we found, I suppose, some satisfaction in staying so. I was wearing a thick coat and leaning on the park wall; her soul was on my shoulder. Suddenly I said, "Good night. It's nearly dawn. I must be going."

"You said you might be leaving New York soon," she ventured.

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“Yes,” said I. “And, quite unexpectedly, I’m through my work. I get off the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she said, “good night,” and never another word.

The next night I went out to say good-bye. I thought it would be only civil. I made no doubt we should find each other along that first half mile of park wall, that she’d descend upon me as she had done before. She wasn’t there. I paced up and down, searching most carefully; my eyes were experts now. I spent the whole night searching. It was broad day when I stopped. I stood in the morning light with my face in my hands, fixing my thoughts in a final effort firmly on her. I hoped that, though I could not see, I should feel her presence near me if she came. Quite in vain.

I could not make up my mind to leave New York without seeing her. It sounds absurd, for what was she to me? What was she anyhow but a disembodied soul, one of thousands and thousands, and all past praying for, spite of anything the good Catholics may say. What

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could there ever be between us? My desires had certainly never been set on New York. Wherever I might find myself when I died it would certainly not be here. But I felt I could not go without seeing her.

For seven nights I searched from dark till daybreak, standing, willing her to come, pacing wildly, silently calling. I remembered then that I didn't even know her name. I slept exhaustedly all day.

On the seventh night the wind was rough. I was at the corner of Sixty-ninth Street when a gust blew her right in my face. I caught her and held her with the roughest grasp.

"Where on earth have you been," I said, "and what have you been doing?"

"I've been quite close to you lots of times," she said. "I can't make out why you didn't see me."

"Now don't you think that because I have a body I can be lied to either," I stormed at her, "you've been wishing yourself out of the way on purpose."

"Yes, I have," she said.

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"Why?" I asked her.

She did not answer.

"Will you tell me why?" I demanded.

"No, I won't," she said, "but if there's anything in it at all you ought to be able to tell without my telling."

"Well, I can't," I snapped.

"I knew you wouldn't," she said, "so what's the good anyway?"

"You really are a most irritating little soul," I said. "Will you tell me what it is you want of me?"

Not, poor dear, that she had shown she wanted anything. She made no answer.

"Will you please tell me what it is you want of me?" I repeated.

Still no answer.

"Then I shall wait here night and day until you do." I did not mean to be bullied. I had made up my mind to that.

A long silence.

Then suddenly — "I want to escape," she said. "I thought I was settling down to it, but talking to you has brought back Time

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again, and now when you go I shall want to escape worse than ever. I shall want to die and I shan't be able to. Won't it be dreadful?"

Her silly little phrase.

"But I really don't see what I can do to help you," I said. "If you can think of anything by all means tell me. I'll certainly try it."

"Where do you go to when you go?" she asked.

"I go West across the prairies and the mountains," I said, "and then Southwest across the sea."

"I knew that really," she confessed, "it has been in your mind all the time. I've been jealous of your having it so much in your mind."

"Well, go on," I told her, sharply, as my way was.

"I thought," she spoke slowly, "that if you could like me well enough to be able to carry me with you part of the way, then why shouldn't you leave me on the prairie as you passed? And there, if I fixed my desire on nothingness, the great wind might carry me to such

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a lonely place that I'd be almost as good as dead — really dead."

"We might try it," I said. "But you would have to like me enough to stop yourself flying back here."

"But how can I like you," she protested, "unless you like me first?"

"Like you in any ordinary sense of the word I certainly do not," I said. "I am a practical man. I have no use for these fantastic exercises of imagination. How do you expect me to like you?"

She sobbed aloud.

"That's because I've lost my body," she cried. "If I had my body back I'd make you like me fast enough — oh dear; oh, dear!"

I did my best to soothe her.

"And now I daresay I'm not even a decent-looking soul," she wailed.

I assured her she was a charming-looking soul.

"What shape am I?" she asked.

I assured her she was a perfect oval, and her colour a most delicate pale grey.

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"It sounds very dull," she said. "I've never dared ask anyone to tell me before. But compared with the others I suppose it's not so bad."

"But if I do try to take you, how am I to take you?" I asked her. "I can't carry you in my hand for two whole days. Besides in the daylight I'd lose you."

"Oh, but I've thought of that," she said. "What you want is a match-box to fold me up and put me in. No, not a real match-box, silly. But one of the — what used the spiritualists to call it? — one of the astral sort."

"And where does one buy those?" I asked.

I was sure she was smiling queerly.

"Have you never been in love with a pretty foolish woman?" she said.

"With dozens," I answered. I always say that; it is safer. But the fact is that I have never been in love at all.

She must have known both of the silly lie and the more shameful truth. But she did not remark on them. Instead —

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"Think of your love for a woman like that," she said, "and you'll find it very like a sort of match-box to carry me about in."

I never sleep in the train, so all night I sat upright in the darkened car. I had taken the Little Soul from my pocket and I held her against my cheek; and through the noise of the shaking of the train all night she whispered in my ear. She was sure she was going to die quite thoroughly now, she said, and did I mind her telling me things she had never told anyone before. "Why should I?" I answered her coldly. I was leaving the country; she could be certain they would go no further.

They were but simple things she had to tell. Of dreams, first for herself, then for her dead children, of little verses she had written and hidden and destroyed, of a temptation to unlawful love that she had shunned. Foolish things, I thought. And I stuck to the thought, though I knew she knew I was thinking it.

The next night I stood on the wide prairie and held her soul in my hand. It was late, for I had walked as far from the town as I could.

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There was no sound. It was cloudy and pitchy dark. No wind as yet, but a feeling as if a wind would rise.

"Now it's good-bye," I said. "I've kept my promise, and I'll wait, what's more, till the wind blows you away."

"Don't put me down for a minute," she begged. "I've something else to tell you."

"What is it?" I asked. "You were talking all last night."

"Oh, nothing about me indeed," she whispered. "I've nothing more to tell. But I wanted you to know why I told you about myself and didn't ask about yourself at all was only because, being so close to you, I could learn and feel and understand all there was in your heart. I knew all that you had done and suffered in your life from the beginning until now."

"Then you know of a poor thing," I said, "a black and hollow thing, a wasted thing."

"Yes," she went on. "And I knew that you were thinking that, but I wanted to tell you that I didn't think so at all. I think you've

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done very well in spite of what people call your failure, and you've always tried your best. Though fame has never come to you, you've set your teeth and gone on, haven't you, and never chattered or complained? And I wanted to tell you that I love you for it."

"I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life," I said. "How can you love me? We're absolutely unsuited to each other in every way. Not a tradition or a taste in common. Besides, you're dead. Quite dead in one sense and almost dead in the other. What's the use of talking about such things?"

"Now don't pretend to be cross when you're not," she went on. "That's childish. I've told you this for a very selfish reason. I thought that instead of running the risk of being blown about this great prairie for ever, if you could learn to love me just enough in return, my soul perhaps might pass utterly into yours and in that way there would be quite an end of me. Now don't interrupt me in what I'm saying. You need a little something like this added to you, a little common sense,

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a little patience, a little tenderness towards helpless things. You need it badly, and it's very conceited of you to pretend you don't. And, oh, my dear," she cried, and the very soul of her seemed to be throbbing. "Love is often like this, you know — how is it that you don't know? — Death to give, but always life to him that will dare take the offered love. And how gladly one dies to give it!"

"I do not love you," I said, "and I won't pretend to. I have never loved anyone and I never will. It's not worth it. I made up my mind to that long ago."

"Very well," she said. "It doesn't matter. Please put me down."

I put her down.

"Good-bye," I said.

"Good-bye," said she.

And then I knelt there for an hour or more. It was dark; I could not see her, and not another word did we say. Waiting so, I felt how dreadful eternity must be.

At last I heard it rise in the far distance, the northwest wind. Shaking and shrieking and

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rumbling it came, in leaps of gusty anger with silence in between. I set my teeth or I must have cried out in fear. But she made never a sound. Then it was on us, brutal, vindictive. I could not help it; I flung myself along the ground to shield her, groping with my hands where I thought she must be. My neck was bare and in a moment I felt the frail little thing she was fluttering close to me.

"I can't," she pleaded in agony, "I'm afraid. It's so cold and merciless and strong. I once had asthma as a child. Take me back to that selfish city. At least they'll understand me there."

"No, no," I whispered, "not back to that. That's worse than any hell. We musn't be cowards, we two, must we?"

"But I can't be lonely through eternity," she wailed. "I can't, I can't. It isn't fair to ask me."

Suddenly I began to shake as if a very ague were on me. I choked. I turned on my side for air. I crushed her soul between my hands. I ground it to my breast.

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I threw my face up to the dark above and a cry came from me that surely God Himself might have heard. "Oh, my dear little soul, my dear little soul!" And the ice within me broke and the tears sprang. I, that had not shed a tear since I could remember!

Before ever the tears could fall my hands that had held her were empty and my lips that would have kissed her foiled. The little soul had vanished.

But my soul was full of joy. And the wind, as I lay there, could not harm me nor the night make me afraid.





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